EDITORIAL

The next generation of electronic journals: prospects and problems

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I recently returned from the annual meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing, a gathering of around 600 individuals that is devoted to discussion of issues relevant to those who publish scholarly books and journals. The majority of attendees are publishers affiliated with scholarly societies, but the meeting also includes a sprinkling of librarians and vendors. In years past, open access had been high on the list of concerns for this meeting. While the issue is still omnipresent and scholarly society publishers still feel threatened by the prospect of losing control over access to information, the focus of discussion has moved on. Now, rather than simply discussing the implications of open access, many of the sessions were devoted to describing ways in which scholarly publishers can enrich their websites. The hope is that by creating sites with more interactive features, scholarly publishers will be able to retain members and readers in an era in which an increasing amount of content will be freely available to all.

For those of us who have watched electronic journals grow from just a few publications to the majority of our serial holdings, this is a much awaited development. From the start, we knew, or hoped, that electronic journals would eventually become more than just a re-creation of print in electronic form. Now it appears that publishers may be ready, at last, to move beyond print-like entities and take full advantage of what electronic delivery systems can offer. The journal as we know it may be about to change, if not radically, then at least significantly. Technology has progressed to the point at which implementing such interactive features is no longer the exclusive prerogative of the very wealthiest publishers. At the same time, journals, or at least society journals, view these features as a way to retain and increase membership in an era in which they no longer have exclusive rights to content or, as one conference speaker put it, information is no longer a scarce commodity.

Picture a journal, if you will, that allows you (if you are a member or subscriber) to provide annotated comments on some or all of the articles that are in the current issue. Unlike a blog, the annotations are paragraph- or line-specific and can be added to, or questioned by, other readers. Alternatively, consider a book that is created by users from the chapters that they find on a publisher's or aggregator's website, enhanced perhaps with articles and other documents. This interactivity is taken to another level on sites like ResearchBlogging.org and Science Blogs.com, where lively discussions of peer-reviewed material occur entirely outside the journals in which those articles were published.

Publishers see such interactivity as key to appealing to what some call the ''Google Generation.'' They have seen the growth of social networking sites and mobile computing platforms and increasing value placed on the recommendations and opinions of others. Incorporating these features into their own sites may allow scholarly publishers not only to hold on to current readers, but also to appeal to the next generation of potential society members. Of course, interactivity has always been part of the print publishing business, witness letters to the editor. However, new web tools make this interactivity possible at a speed and fluidity that was never possible in print.

While all this interactivity is exciting, it poses a problem for libraries, whose traditional mission is to preserve the scholarly record. What does an interactive scholarly record look like? If a journal changes daily, as annotations are added to content or material repackaged for the user, what is the record that we need to preserve? If general blogging websites become institutionalized, as their creators hope, how do we capture the record of new ideas that develop on these sites?

These are not idle questions. Although scholarly publishers may also believe that part of their mission is to preserve interesting content, the past provides ample evidence that they will be slow to consider the need for a scholarly archive. I recall that when scanning back files became a money-making proposition, many publishers suddenly realized they lacked the complete print runs of all their journals. When it came to archiving electronic journals, we all know that libraries had to push, and are still pushing, publishers to create mechanisms that will ensure a record for the future. In the case of the features mentioned here, the picture is even more worrisome. Because journal publishers view these features as a way to attract subscriptions, they are likely to be restricted to members or subscribers only; our libraries may not even get access to them in the present, much less have them preserved for the future.

Most of us, I suspect, will be delighted to see electronic journals and books move to a new stage in which they are not just a re-creation of print. However, we need to remember our role as librarians in the process of scholarly communication. Our users should be able to look to us for leadership in preserving the scholarly record. Now is the time to start talking to our colleagues in the scholarly publishing business about how we are going to create a record for tomorrow from the discussions of today.

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